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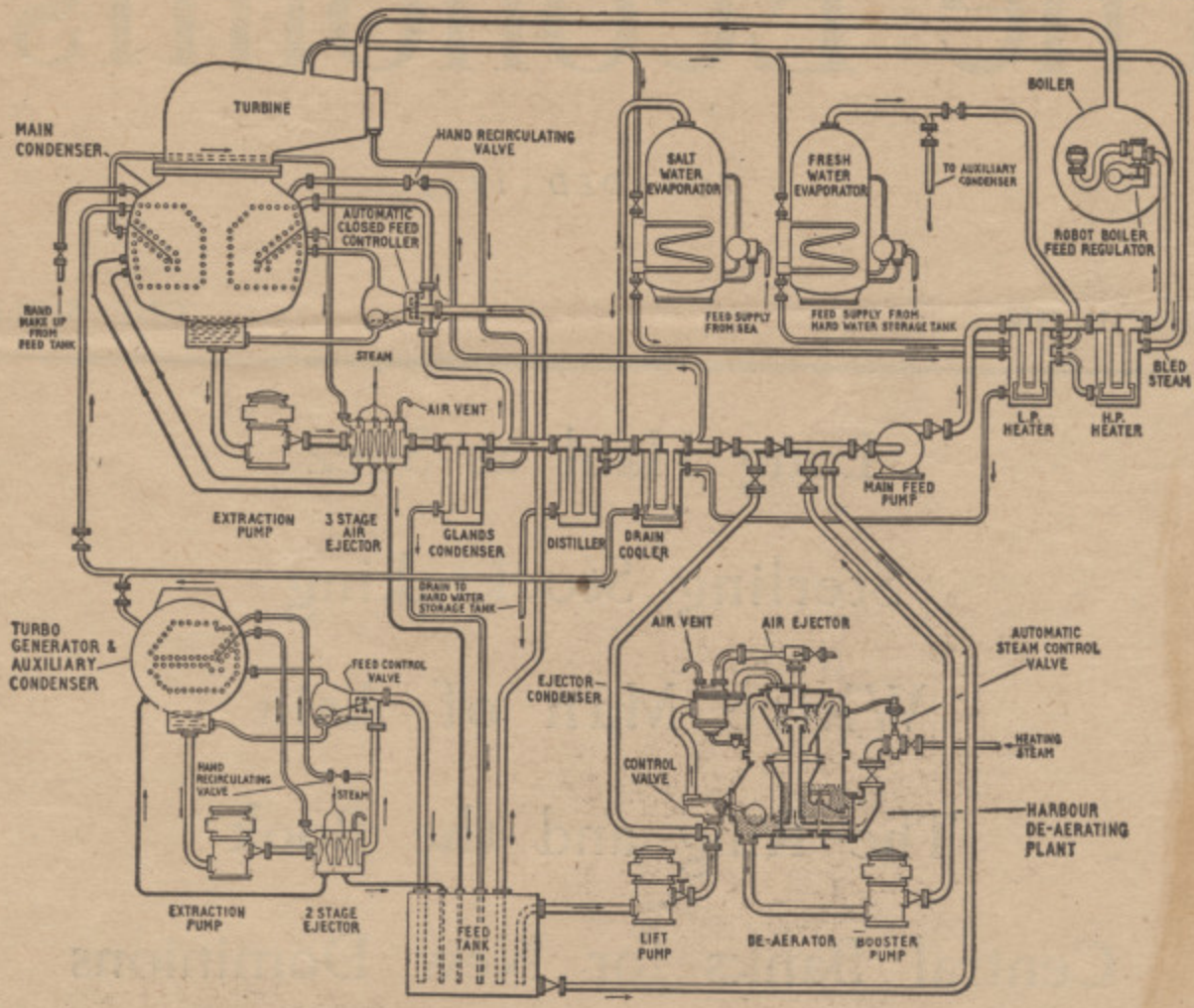

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Labour Meets the Colour Line

FROM A CORRESPONDENT IN MISSISSIPPI

THE great drive to unionise southern labour has chosen, as its first major target, the textile industry which has the bulk of its 700,000 unorganised workers in the South. The decision by the executive council of the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations to go ahead was a brave but perhaps an ill-advised one. The old CIO Textile Workers' Union of America, with 300,000 members, and the AFL United Textile Workers, with a third of that number, have not yet amalgamated, and the southern drive is therefore being launched under a divided command. Moreover, because of the inflexible stand in favour of racial integration taken by the national trade union federation, the climate of opinion in the South is more hostile to labour organisers who come in from outside than at any time since the depression years. It has always been difficult to organise unions in the South: the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, active in this region for decades, have only 30,000 southerners among their 400,000 members. And now union leaders admit that the fight over racial segregation has set back their efforts to organise more workers by from five to ten years.

Already a Southern States Conference of Union People, meeting in Chattanooga, Tennessee, has openly challenged the "forced integration" policies of the AFL-CIO. It has called on southern labour to "preserve our constitutional rights and our status as union people." In Birmingham, Alabama, a number of men belonging to the AFL-CIO union are forming an organisation of Southern Fabricating and Steel Workers, and in the same city the Southern Aircraft Workers have been launched. But initial reactions were not very enthusiastic when an attempt was made recently to form a Southern Federation of Labour, to hold the colour line, at a meeting in Birmingham; it was attended by representatives of ten southern states, but a large proportion of those invited failed to appear. It is too early as yet to evaluate the significance of these local revolts.

Spokesmen for organised labour denounce the White Citizens Councils for deliberately harnessing racial prejudices to a traditional hostility to the labour movement as such. The president of the Textile Workers' Union of America has issued a warning that these Councils—set up to preserve the southern "way of life"—are out to block political and economic changes that will result from the growth of unions. It is true that the most outspoken defenders of white supremacy are also among the most notorious labour-baiters. A former Governor of Arkansas said of the Councils: "Today their attack is against the Negro. Tomorrow their attack is against the labour unionist."

The essentially rural "southern way of life" has never taken easily to trade unionism and the forces which mould public opinion in the small towns and which are now fighting the racial battle have had long experience in "saving" the local workers from "communistic labour agitators" from the North. A case in point is the recent ordinance of the town of Dublin, Georgia, which requires a union organiser to have been a resident of the community for five years, to pay a licence fee of $2,500, and to swear that no union money will be spent to encourage violation of the laws on segregation. And in Chapman, Alabama, where the woodworkers have been on strike for almost a year, detectives paid by the lumber company have been brought in as deputy sheriffs and town marshals "to preserve order." The mayor in this medieval barony—where the town literally belongs to the company—doubles as personnel director for the lumber concern. Its lawyer is in the forefront of the Citizens Council movement. When a northern-owned company advises its southern employees to join the trade union, as a result of the objection of workers in its unionised factories in the North when their products are combined with those from its non-unionised plants in the South, local businessmen are dumbfounded and local newspapers cry out in anguish against the Negroes and the Communists.

Except in lumbering, mining, and steel manufacturing, Negroes have not been employed in large numbers in southern industry. This has been a major factor in the exodus to the North of coloured agricultural workers displaced from the farms. But in progressive establishments, more and more Negroes are being used, many of them working alongside white employees. Accomplished judiciously and with great patience, this degree of integration has caused little friction. Company managers in such plants, however, are deeply concerned today because of mounting tension.

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With jurisdictional problems still to be settled between the formerly separate AFL and CIO, and with most of southern labour adamant on the race issue, the question arises as to why the national leaders of the AFL-CIO persist in their drive for organisation at the present time. Many southerners profess to see this as an attempt to arrest the southward movement of northern industry. Recently the *New York Times* listed six corporations which had changed their plans to establish plants in the South because of the fear of racial tension. Certainly the trade unions' perennial drive for an ever higher national minimum wage is partially stimulated by the desire to eliminate one of the South's strongest inducements to northern business—cheap labour. This touchy problem was recently brought out into the open when the United Hatters, Cap and Millinery Workers called upon Congress to prevent "subsidised sweatshops" by prohibiting southern communities from offering tax exemptions and other benefits to northern industries to seduce them into the land of low wages and "company unions." But outsiders often fail to realise that when men from submarginal farms on which no one could make a living are brought into southern factories, even at wages below the national level, they have taken a step up the economic ladder.

In spite of its present embarrassments, however, organised labour can look forward to happier days in the South as industrialisation gathers speed. Each year politicians solicit labour support more greedily; the unions recently helped to keep Texas faithful to the Democrats, and have considerable political strength in Tennessee, Florida and Alabama. The "right-to-work" statute which outlawed the union shop, and which was passed so jauntily two years ago by the Louisiana legislature, has been repealed as a result of labour's political activity in that state. Amalgamation of AFL and CIO unions has already been achieved in Arkansas, Louisiana and Tennessee. City newspapers which a decade or two ago carried only anti-labour stories now have a tendency towards a fuller and more objective report on the trade union front. Once the racial fight has run its course, southern labour seems bound to turn to the only agency that can give it self-protection.